

## Sermon: John 20:19-31 20210411 (St Mary Oatlands)

Do you have to see an historical event to believe it happened? Is it reasonable to demand that you see it with your own eyes, otherwise you'll never believe it?

I hope you'll agree with me that it's unreasonable to demand that the Duke of Wellington fight and win the battle of Waterloo all over again, otherwise you'll never accept that he won? Or that the Prime Minister should go and contract Covid-19 and recover again, or you won't believe he ever did so?

None of us witnessed most events in history. But isn't it totally unreasonable to insist they be repeated before our eyes - or we won't believe they happened?

Yet Thomas takes this attitude in our gospel reading today. And many people in the 21st century share his view.

Thomas won't believe that Jesus has risen and appeared to the other disciples - unless Jesus appears to Thomas and gives him his very own show - so Thomas can "see the marks in Jesus' hands and put his finger where the nails were, and put his hand into Jesus' side." Thomas's disbelief might be understandable - but surely it isn't reasonable.

Three questions then, about Thomas the disciple and the risen Jesus. We're doing the usual three questions at the beginning of the sermon today, instead of at the end!

Firstly, was Thomas' disbelief reasonable?

Secondly, what about us?

Thirdly, why is all this so important - whether you'd call yourself a Christian or not?

### 1) WAS THOMAS'S DISBELIEF REASONABLE?

Firstly, Thomas's disbelief.

The disciples are cowering in a locked room, scared of the Jewish authorities. Jesus has just been crucified. The disciples have lost their friend, their leader, their Messiah - and with him their hope of a new life in a better world. Not only that, but these men deserted Jesus at his death. They did a runner when the moment came.

These men are crushed.

And then, to their great joy, Jesus appears with those glorious, forgiving words, "Peace be with you!".

But Thomas is not there. And when Thomas returns and the others tell him the wonderful news, he's not having any of it. "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe."

I want absolute proof, or I won't believe!

Now Thomas hasn't had the joy of seeing Jesus. He's still crushed, despairing. Jesus was crucified. Dead people don't rise, do they? The authorities have won, haven't they? These other disciples have been under great strain. It's getting to them. Thomas is a realist. These guys need to get real.

So we might think Thomas' disbelief is understandable. And yet when we think about it, Thomas's disbelief is totally unreasonable. Look at the evidence before him!

He's known the other disciples and lived cheek by jowl with them for three years. He's shared fears, hopes, some unique experiences of history with them. He has their eyewitness testimony that Jesus has risen.

He has the testimony of Mary Magdalene, who saw the risen Jesus outside the tomb. He's had Jesus' teaching - three years of the greatest sermons ever heard, of Jesus' devastating rebuttals of his opponents. And Jesus' constant warnings that he would be killed and would rise from the dead on the third day.

He has the words Jesus spoke about his death just a few days earlier, when Jesus said, "I have told you now before it happens, so that when it does happen you will believe."

And Thomas has seen Jesus' miracles. He's seen Jesus raise Lazarus from the dead, walk on water, give sight to a man born blind, and so on.

And he has God's witness to Jesus in the Old Testament, which Thomas would have known well. The hundreds of prophecies pointing to Jesus as God's Messiah who would conquer death.

Thomas has all the evidence - capped by the testimony of ten credible, well-known eyewitnesses. Surely it's unreasonable of him not to go with the evidence?

## 2) WHAT ABOUT US?

What about us, then? Do we go with the evidence - do we go with reason?

We have all the evidence Thomas had - and more. We too have the Old Testament, pointing to Jesus as God's Messiah who would conquer death. We too have the testimony of Mary Magdalene, recorded for us in John's eyewitness account. We too have eyewitness narratives of Jesus' miracles, his signs. We too have written records of Jesus' words.

And we have more! We have the accounts of others who, after Thomas, also saw Jesus alive - hundreds of people! We have historical records of the spectacular growth of the early church. A church which grew from a dozen or two frightened men and women at Jesus' death to thousands upon thousands of people within a few weeks.

And we have two thousand years of the growth of the Christian church,. A church whose defining belief is that Jesus rose from the dead - that, after all, is the message of Easter and of the Christian gospel.

And of course we have the witness of Thomas himself - the sceptic, the ultimate realist.

When Jesus returned in an exact replay of his first appearance to the disciples, Thomas was there. And Thomas believed almost against his will, because he couldn't argue with the evidence before him - it was utterly convincing, incontrovertible.

Realistic, sceptical Thomas, who saw and believed that Jesus is risen from the dead. And drew the obvious conclusion, "My Lord and my God!"

Isn't the reasonable thing for us to do to follow the evidence? Evidence which points convincingly to Jesus risen from the dead?

Yet people don't. They say things like, 'if only Jesus were to come here now, so I could see him. Then I could believe.' That's the Thomas position, isn't it? Unless I see, I won't believe. Unless Jesus comes and does a personal show for me, I won't believe. But Jesus says "blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

The Christian faith is **based** on evidence. The founding fact of Christianity, the resurrection of Jesus, is one of the best evidenced facts in ancient history.

God has given us the ability to judge things - to decide if they make sense. He wants us to use it here, to use our reason, to assess the evidence that Jesus rose from the dead.

And he's given us plenty of evidence! The evidence Thomas had - and that even more so we have - firm evidence that Jesus rose from the dead. Credible eye-witness accounts backed up by a mass of manuscript, archeological, scientific, historical and social evidence - plus the experience and testimony of millions of people over two thousand years.

Aren't we being highly unreasonable, if we ignore all the evidence? If we demand some proof that we dictate, or that Jesus do a one man personalised show for each of us - as if he were some kind of performing seal? Otherwise we refuse to believe?

If you decide to disbelieve evidence, that's your decision. But please examine it. Please don't pretend that there isn't any evidence for Jesus' resurrection, or that there's not enough. There's plenty.

### 3) WHY IS THIS SO IMPORTANT?

Finally, then, our third question - why is it so important to believe Jesus rose from the dead?

Because it vindicates Jesus. It establishes his claim to be the Son of God, the Messiah, the Christ. And it validates his promise in our passage, "blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

To those who have not seen and yet have believed Jesus makes this massive promise of blessing. Peace with God, complete forgiveness whatever we've done, whatever our faults, new life to its fullness with him, forever.

Life in a world which one day will be put to rights - no sickness, pain, poverty, violence, sorrow, oppression, injustice, hatred or strife. No death.

Total goodness, justice, blessing and joy, for all who believe.

That is why Christians down through the ages have gone to extreme lengths, above all else, to proclaim the resurrection of Jesus to the ends of the earth. That Christ has died, Christ is risen, and Christ will come again.

That is why John wrote his gospel, as he says in the last verse of our passage, "...these (things) are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name."

And that is why John wrote in his first letter - which we also heard read earlier - that, "We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ."

The late great Bill Shankly, among other things one time manager of Liverpool Football Club, is remembered as saying, 'football is not a matter of life or death, it's much more important than that.'

With due apology to Bill Shankly, the resurrection of Jesus is not a matter of life or death, it's much more important than that.

If you're a Christian, please make sure your faith is well grounded on the fact of Jesus' resurrection - that it's evidence-based.

If you wouldn't call yourself a Christian, please don't walk past the evidence without having a good look at it - it's much more important than life and death - it means real life!

Amen.